

WILDLIFE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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December 17, 2008

Orange County Transportation Authority
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Orange County/Los Angeles County Intercounty Transportation Study

To the Board of Directors, Orange County Transportation Authority and Board Members, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority:

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority (WCCA) was created to provide for the proper planning, conservation, environmental protection and maintenance of the habitat and wildlife corridor between the Whittier-Puente Hills and the Cleveland National Forest in the Santa Ana Mountains. Per communications between Ms. Marissa Espino of Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) staff and our staff, we understand that the Orange County/Los Angeles County Transportation Study has been completed and the final conceptual alternatives report will be presented to the OCTA Board at the end of January. We understand that Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) may also be considering this study at an upcoming Board meeting. We ask that you consider incorporating and responding to the following comments in the report and that you consider these comments at the meeting(s) where you consider the report.

Purpose of WCCA and Significance of Wildlife Corridor

As background, WCCA's goal is to assure that sufficient continuity of habitat can be preserved to maintain a functioning wildlife corridor made up of about 40,000 acres of land located between the Santa Ana Mountains and Whittier Hills. This includes approximately 4,600 acres of publicly protected habitat to the west and about 14,000 acres of publicly protected habitat to the east. This approximately 31-mile wildlife corridor serves wildlife migration and also functions as an essential environmental, scientific, educational, and recreational resource which

should be held in trust for present and future generations. That as the last major natural open space resource connecting Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside Counties, it provides essential relief from the urban environment; and that it exists as a single ecosystem in which changes that affect one part may also affect all other parts.

Areas of Concern in Orange County/Los Angeles County Intercounty Transportation Study Conceptual Alternatives

According to some of the figures on the OCTA website (http://www.octa.net/pdf/ocla_alts.pdf, "Initial Set of Conceptual Alternative Strategies"), it appears that improvements are proposed at several roadways that traverse the wildlife corridor. To clarify, WCCA is more concerned with physical expansion of these roads (e.g., physical widening and/or extending paved roads) rather than simple restriping of existing roads. The areas of concern to WCCA include the following:

- (1) "Add one general purpose lane in each direction" identified along Harbor Boulevard from La Habra Blvd. to Pathfinder Rd. and "Rapid Bus" identified along Harbor Boulevard (page 3 of 6, Initial Set of Conceptual Alternative Strategies).
- (2) "Extend Tonner Canyon Rd. to Grand Ave" (page 3).
- (3) "Add one general purpose lane in each direction" identified along Brea Canyon Road from Central Avenue to Pathfinder Road (page 3).
- (4) Several of the figures (pages 1, 3, 4, and 6) identify adding additional lanes to State Route 57.

In particular, WCCA is concerned with any proposed physical widening of Harbor Boulevard due to potential adverse impacts to wildlife movement in this important area. Harbor Boulevard was identified as one of three areas of concern in the Puente-Chino Hills, because it is a choke point for wildlife movement (Haas and Crooks 1999). Notably, the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority, a local government park agency, together with the County of Los Angeles and the California Department of Parks and Recreation jointly funded and obtained other funding to construct the Harbor Boulevard Wildlife Underpass in 2006 to accommodate large-to medium-sized mammals. The underpass project is unique in that it is the first wildlife underpass built in the County of Los Angeles. It was a multi-agency collaborative project that took over nine years and over \$1.3 million to come about. We are concerned with the effects of widening of Harbor Boulevard in this area on the success of this project and with the general ability of wildlife to cross Harbor Boulevard. In addition we are concerned with whether the proposed improvements are consistent with the circulation policies of the La Habra Heights General Plan, and whether the widening would be consistent with the rural environment goals of General Plan.

With respect to extending Tonner Canyon Road, the value of Tonner Canyon for wildlife movement and other biological resources cannot be overstated. Tonner Canyon is a critical portion of the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor. It is utilized by bobcat, coyote, deer, and fox (Haas and Crooks 1999), and mountain lion have been documented (Beier 1993, as cited in Haas and Crooks 1999). It supports several sensitive vegetative communities and wildlife (e.g., least Bell's vireo, a bird listed as federally endangered). The Tonner Canyon underpass is the only underpass under the 57 Freeway that is being used by wildlife, and it is therefore a choke point in that there is only a single option to cross the freeway (aside from attempting a surface crossing) (Haas and Crooks 1999).

WCCA has consistently opposed any new road in Tonner Canyon. One of the principal factors contributing to habitat fragmentation has been the construction of roadways (Meffe et al. 1997, as cited in Haas and Crooks 1999). Roads can create barriers for animals (e.g., mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds) attempting to move between patches, increase mortality (i.e., by collisions with vehicles), and can create deleterious edge effects (e.g., weeds, lighting). If a road is built through Tonner Canyon, it may permanently compromise the ecological viability of the protected lands and the corridor, as well as this significant investment, in excess of \$200 million, of public funds, which was used to purchase land at each end of the wildlife corridor.

On a similar note, any proposed widening of Brea Canyon Road and State Route 57 have the potential to result in regionally significant unavoidable adverse effects to the wildlife corridor and other biological resources.

The Harbor Boulevard widening and extension of Tonner Canyon Road would undoubtedly result in significant adverse impacts to wildlife movement. We recommend that the proposed widening of Harbor Boulevard and the extension of Tonner Canyon Road be deleted from the study. However, if the OCTA and Metro elect not to delete these project elements from the plan, we recommend that the plan disclose fully the significance of the Puente Chino Hills wildlife corridor, the potential extent of adverse impacts to the wildlife corridor, and potential mitigation measures that could be implemented. Mitigation measures could include installing undercrossings, installing appropriate fencing and landscaping, and most importantly purchasing/protecting nearby open space land. This analysis should also be included for the widening of Brea Canyon Road and State Route 57.

We emphasize that it would be premature to adopt a plan with these alternatives included, when the analysis has not been completed to conclude whether these alternatives would result in regionally significant unavoidable adverse environmental impacts. Even if this is only a preliminary conceptual alternatives study, these potentially significant adverse

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impacts to the wildlife corridor and other biological resources, which may render these alternative infeasible, must be identified.

We would appreciate if you would include WCCA on the email/ mailing list for public notices for this project and for meetings pertaining to this project. We also look forward to reviewing the conceptual alternatives report, once it becomes available. It is our understanding that it will be available online once it is approved by OCTA. If you have any questions, please contact Judi Tamasi of our staff by phone at (310) 589-3200, ext. 121 or by email at judi.tamasi@mrca.ca.gov. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Glenn Parker
Chairperson

cc: Marissa Espino, Senior Community Relations Specialist, OCTA